

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM

TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN



MEDIA ADVISORY

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Government Reform Committee to Examine Renewed Federal Investment in Metro, Coupled with Enhanced Accountability

What: Hearing titled, “Keeping Metro on Track: The Federal Government’s Role in Improving Accountability and Performance at Washington’s Transit Agency”

When: Thursday, July 28, 2005, 10:00 a.m.

Where: Room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building

Overview

The Committee on Government Reform, chaired by Rep. Tom Davis (R-VA), will conduct a hearing on the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA).

The hearing will examine why a much-needed, renewed federal investment in the Metro system should be accompanied by enhanced federal oversight and accountability measures, and why both initiatives should be part of Metro authorization legislation Davis plans to introduce.

The federal government has historically provided significant financial support because WMATA plays an indispensable role in supporting the federal government’s operations and is a key force in the region’s economic well-being. The continued success of WMATA is critical for the region as visitors, businesses, and governments all benefit from the system.

This hearing is a continuation of the committee’s examination of the federal government’s role in helping WMATA address both its funding and management challenges.

Background

In the 1950's, Congress began to study ways to address the D.C. metropolitan area's growing traffic problems in an effort to ensure federal workers and contractors retained easy access to government workplaces. A proposal for an extensive highway network generated fierce local opposition, leading to a call for a transit system to reduce emphasis on roads. This plan was formalized in 1960 when President Eisenhower signed the National Capital Transportation Act, creating the National Capital Transportation Agency (NCTA) to develop a rapid rail system.

In 1965, Congress authorized \$431 million for the construction of a 25-mile transit system capable of further expansion. Congress passed subsequent authorizations in 1980 and 1990, ultimately providing a \$6.4 billion federal investment for a 103-mile system. To manage the system, an interstate compact creating the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) was approved by the legislatures of Maryland and Virginia, the commissioners of the District of Columbia, and Congress in 1967. WMATA took over the role of the NCTA, and continues to manage the system today.

Since its inception, Metro has been viewed in large part as a federal responsibility due to the important role it plays in the daily function of the federal government. This sentiment is perhaps best illustrated by the following finding from the National Capital Transportation Amendments of 1979 (Stark-Harris), one of the legislative vehicles for funding construction of the system.

“Congress finds that an improved transportation system for the National Capital region is essential for the continued and effective performance of the functions of the Government of the United States, for the welfare of the District of Columbia, for the orderly growth and development of the National Capital region, and for the preservation of the beauty and dignity of the Nation's Capital.”

Indeed, not only was the Metro system planned to provide easy access to federal buildings, its physical appearance was to befit the capital of a great nation. Thus, Metro stations are characterized by vaulted ceilings, and its cars provide an amount of seating and comfort not found on other systems.

In recent years, Metro's management has issued warnings that without additional investment, the core 103-mile system faces significant challenges that could lead to declining service and safety throughout the system. This is due to not only the aging of the original system, but also the rapidly increasing demand imposed by additional riders. The D.C. region faces the third worst congestion in the country, leading more and more commuters and visitors to rely on Metro for transportation.

Federal employees and contractors comprise half of Metro's peak ridership. From another perspective, 40 percent of the federal workforce uses the Metro system. Thus, the system is more important than ever to accomplishing the original goal of ensuring access to government workplaces for federal workers and contractors.

Funding

WMATA's Board of Directors adopted a 10-Year Capital Improvement Plan in 2002 that identified \$12.2 billion in projects to maintain, expand, and to build extensions to the existing system. System extensions, such as the one to Dulles Airport, are primarily the responsibility of the local jurisdictions, and will not be addressed in the context of this hearing. Highlights of the other capital needs are as follows:

- 340 new rail cars – enough to run all 8 car trains during peak service hours and making full use of Metro's system capacity.
- 275 new buses and 3 bus garages
- Pay for ongoing maintenance and renewal of WMATA's capital assets, such as station and bus facility rehabilitation, vehicle replacement, tunnel repairs, and system upgrades.
- Station enhancements (additional escalators, elevators, expanded mezzanines) at congested transfer stations, including Union Station, Gallery Place and Metro Center.
- Pedestrian Station Connections (Farragut North to Farragut West and Gallery Place to Metro Center). These will allow passengers to change service lines by walking through these tunnels rather than having to use one of the current transfer stations.
- Pedestrian and bicycle improvements at 25 stations.
- 140 miles of bus corridor improvements, including signal prioritization, preferential bus lanes, left-turn priority, bus stop relocation, curb extensions, improved transit centers and facilities, additional park & ride and kiss & ride facilities, bus bays, passenger waiting areas and customer facilities, improved shelters, lighting, accessibility and customer information.

The total cost of these projects is \$8.2 billion. Of this amount, state and local governments are anticipated to contribute \$4.2 billion. \$2.4 billion is anticipated from current federal transit grant sources, leaving a shortfall of slightly less than \$1.6 billion.

Chairman Davis plans to introduce bipartisan legislation in the near future to authorize a new federal investment in Metro.

Oversight and Accountability

In June, the *Washington Post* ran a series of articles entitled "Off the Rails." This series documented several incidents where safety and contracting oversight seemed to be lacking. A specific example would be the contract signed with CAF, Inc., a Spanish firm from whom WMATA signed a contract to purchase 200 new rail cars. The CAF cars have been plagued by mechanical defects since they came on line, resulting in undue delays for passengers. Other questions of quality control with these cars have brought into question WMATA's methods for overseeing large contracts of this nature. Richard

White, the system's CEO, has argued that controls have been tightened to prevent a recurrence of the CAF problems.

Questions remain as to whether WMATA does, in fact, have sufficient oversight to ensure efficiency in financial, operational, and safety matters. WMATA currently has an auditor general who reports to the general manager of the system. The Committee will specifically review whether additional oversight is needed, especially in light of the sizeable request Metro has made for federal assistance.

Chairman Davis plans to include additional oversight and accountability mechanisms in his authorization bill.

Witnesses

Katherine Siggerud, Director, Physical Infrastructure Issues, GAO

Richard White, CEO, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority

Dana Kauffman, Board Chairman, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority

William Millar, President, American Public Transportation Association

Robert Puentes, Fellow, Metropolitan Policy, Brookings Institute

Pauline Schneider, Partner, Hunton and Williams; Member, Federal City Council

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